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AUTHOR Fishman, Florence; Dugan, Marjorie
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes support programs and services at the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) designed to provide alternatives for the nontraditional student. All entering students scoring below the 20th percentile on the reading section of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills are advised to enter a program named Project II, a block scheduled program containing two credit courses and two noncredit remedial reading and writing courses. Students who have been away from school, or whose academic preparation is weak, have an option to enter the Cooperative Learning Program, a two-semester program offering courses from almost all curricular areas of the college as well as training in study skills, career information sessions, and tutoring. Counselors are attached to the programs to follow up on students, providing assistance as necessary. Some data on these programs already indicate success: retention rate for the Cooperative Learning Program was 91% compared to 67% for the college overall, and over 50% of the students enrolled in the program advanced to sophomore status after one year while only 15 to 25% of the general college freshmen did so. A discussion of the tutoring component of the program and the services of the Learning Laboratory is presented, as is a brief discussion of future institutional responses to nontraditional students. (JDS)

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ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

Submitted by:

Florence Fishman
Coordinator,
Learning Laboratory

Marjorie Dugan
Coordinator, Cooperative
Learning Program

Community College
34 South 11th Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19107

JC 760 512

The Community College of Philadelphia is an urban two-year community college which was opened in 1965. At that time the enrollment at the College was 725 full-time, and 493 part-time students. Currently, the College serves 5,456 full-time, and 5,298 part-time students. More than 50% of the student body receives financial support of some kind.

The composition of the student body is: 52% Afro-American black; 43% white; and 5% other (predominantly Spanish-speaking Americans). The students range in age from 17 to 50 and above. Over 51% of the student body is over 21 years of age.

In 1970, the College adopted a policy of open-admissions. In response to the goals created by this policy, the College has committed itself to the education of the non-traditional student(Roueche and Kirk, 1973). However, failure and attrition rates have been extremely high, as in most community colleges (Moore, 1970).

In response, the College has established support programs and services to provide alternatives for the non-traditional student.

All of the entering students at Community College of Philadelphia are given the Reading section of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills before registration. Students who receive scores below the twentieth percentile are strongly advised to enter a program named Project II.

In Project II, the student is assigned four subjects. Two are remedial English courses, one in reading and one in writing. The other two courses are college level, taught by regular faculty. Students are block-scheduled. A class of twenty students is assigned to the same schedule. For example, one block of students would have a Sociology course that gives college credit (Sociology 101), a course in Public Speaking that gives college credit (English 115), a remedial reading course (English 098; no credit), and remedial writing course (English 098; no credit). Students register for the block which meets their interests most closely. Those interested in science, may, for example study Chemistry 090 (pre-college, non-credit Chemistry course), Mathematics 190 (college credit mathematics course), and the two previously mentioned remedial English courses. Students have a choice of approximately 8-10 different blocks. The Psychology block has been the number one choice of the students.

Although many problems remain to be solved, the program is one solution for the student who has a high school diploma, and is keen on taking college courses, but has marked academic deficiencies.

Students at the college who have been away from school for awhile, who have weak or inappropriate high school backgrounds have the choice of another program which is called the Cooperative Learning Program.

The Cooperative Learning Program is a two-semester program. The program offers courses from almost all curricular areas at Community College. Each student takes English composition plus 3 other courses pertinent to his career/educational goals. (For example, a student preparing for a bachelor's degree in psychology might take English Composition, linear mathematics, general biology and introduction to psychology.)

In addition to content courses, each student is assigned to an orientation group for a period of 7 weeks during the Fall semester. During the sessions the student is introduced to study skills--organizing time, reading the text, note taking, test taking, etc. The student is given the Strong-Campbell Interest Invertory and this is used as the basis for career information sessions which comprise part of the orientation. The sessions culminate in a general meeting with Division Directors and Curriculum Coordinators involved with specific areas (e.g., nursing, data processing, education), during which time students can discuss career opportunities and question the speakers.

Another important aspect of the Program is tutoring. Each student is scheduled for 6 hours of tutoring per week, based on his academic needs (e.g., two hours in English, one hour in mathematics, two hours in biology, and one hour in psychology). This can be adjusted throughout the semester, and students may negotiate out of mandatory tutoring by meeting the criteria established by the individual instructor (e.g., scoring a grade of B or more on all tests and quizzes).

If the student decides to enter the Cooperative Learning Program, he must sign a contract agreeing to attend and be punctual for all classes, conferences, and tutoring and orientation sessions.

The contract also states that if the student meets his obligation, he may obtain additional time to complete course work, when necessary. This enables the student to work at his own pace.

Tutoring is assigned twice a week for each college content course, and for the English writing course. Additional reading assistance is given individually or in groups by a reading specialist in the Learning Laboratory. The tutoring is done either by a current Community College student who has received faculty recommendation in a subject, by recent Community College graduates who return to work for the Learning Laboratory or by the occasional assistant with a Bachelor's degree who works part-time in the Learning Laboratory. Approximately 5-6 students are assigned to one tutor during free hours. The tutor must maintain close contact with the instructor whose students are being tutored. It is required that a tutor attend some regular classes with his tutoring group, and keep up to date with the syllabi and other instructional materials. Beyond these expectations, tutors have responded creatively by assisting students with test-taking, reading the text, note-taking, and remembering difficult information. The personal bond that is established between tutor and tutee is probably as important as the content imparted by the tutor. Success becomes a team effort, and students seek out their tutors to tell them they received an A or B or that they were disappointed in the results of an examination.

At the start of the past semester five orientation sessions were initiated in the Learning Laboratory for groups of Project II students in order to ease the transition to college, to give college information, and to begin work in study skills before the tutoring sessions began.

Two counselors are attached to the program (for 225 students), and an attempt is made by the counselors to follow the students and to help them with any difficulties they encounter whether they are academic, financial or emotional.

The Learning Laboratory staff has worked closely with the program and often is asked to consult with the faculty of Project II classes, and to assist some of the instructors who are inexperienced in working with the low skilled student. It is difficult to find college instructors who are prepared to work with students at this level, but many who do accept the assignment find it challenging and exciting.

There has been an attempt to continue the program for a second semester. During the second semester the students will carry reading and writing courses on their schedules, but these courses will be on a college level, and will earn college credits. They will also take two other regular college courses.

Classes have a maximum of 25 students, as opposed to the college-wide class size maximum of 36.

The faculty meets twice monthly to discuss possible means for assisting those students enrolled in the Program. These meetings precipitate a "sharing of ideas" with concomitant development of new and improved teaching methods. In addition, some faculty members of the team aid in advising.

The design of the Program approaches the cluster concept (i.e., "the small school within a school"). Services for both students and teachers are provided through the office of the coordinator of the Program. It is considered a key element of the Program's success, for both faculty and students find that there is an immediate response to their needs, by personnel known well to both. This supportive, personalized structure assumes even more importance in light of the College's rapid growth over the past several years.

In the Fall, 1973, when the Program originated, the team consisted of 4 instructors, and 66 students were enrolled.

The following year, the team consisted of 11 teachers and 150 students were enrolled in the Program.

Currently, 26 teachers are working in the Program and 250 students are assisted through the Cooperative Learning Program.

Next year, 375 students are anticipated and 31 teachers have already agreed to work in the Program.

Students previously enrolled in the Program continue to encourage their friends and relatives to join the Program. Some data already obtained indicates the program has proved to be successful. The rate of retention is greater for students enrolled in the Program, then for those enrolled in the College in general. From September, 1974, to January, 1975, the College had an over-all retention rate of 67 percent. During the same period of time, the rate of retention for the Cooperative Learning Program was 91 percent.

In order for students to be considered sophomores in their second year of College, they must successfully complete 24 credits. Generally, from 15 to 25 percent of entering freshmen complete this number of credits by the beginning of their second year. During the first year of the Program (1973-1974 academic year), over 50 percent of those students enrolled in the Program completed at least 24 credits.

Faculty who have joined the Program remain (90% retention), and encourage colleagues to join.

A close liaison with the Learning Laboratory is essential in order to carry out the tutoring aspects of the Program.

The Learning Laboratory was opened three years ago in response to the need of the large number of students who lacked the academic background for independent pursuit of the Associate Degree. For a number of reasons which are still hotly disputed, the students at the Community College needed academic assistance in order to pass courses. Therefore, the first function of the Learning Laboratory was to provide tutoring in academic subjects. Tutors for regular college courses are selected in the same manner as those in Project II. Many, in fact, tutor both Project II students and regular college students. There is some group training for tutors in Attitude Awareness and a few sessions which deal with responsibilities of tutors in the laboratory. Other sessions deal with methods of working with students to improve their performance. Also, each of the tutors is required to meet with the Coordinator of the Learning Lab to discuss specific tutoring problems, class visitations, faculty expectations, etc. The Coordinator oversees the daily work of the tutors and talks with tutors and tutees informally about their progress.

A student desiring assistance comes to the Learning Lab, states his needs, fills out his schedule and is given an appointment slip noting the tutor's name and the time for the appointment. This appointment is noted in a book, and the name of the tutee and the appointment time is written on a slip and posted for the tutor.

The tutee's schedule, the instructor's name and the titles of the books that the student is using in the course are placed in the tutor's folder along with a questionnaire for each tutee. The questionnaire requires answers to problems such as:

1. Is the student having problems reading the text?
2. Is the student having problems taking notes?
3. Would the student like to talk to a member of the Learning Lab staff about his problems?

The answers are filled out mutually by tutor and tutee. In addition, a resume sheet is included and is used by the tutee and tutor to summarize the main points covered in the tutoring session. This feedback is important for both parties and should help to reinforce the main points that were covered in the session.

It should be noted that tutors are expected to visit the classes for which they are tutoring even though they have completed the course themselves. Because of great individual differences in teaching styles, in text and in approach within the same department, it is incumbent on the tutors to be familiar with as many faculty as possible.

As the Learning Laboratory grew, it was found that professional reading instruction was needed in addition to the regular college reading courses. Now one full time reading professional, three part time day reading professionals and two other part timers who service the evening sessions and Saturday Workshops have been employed. Reading specialists in the Lab must be paragons of patience and creativity. They work with students individually or in groups at all levels of reading ability. Through Community Services, former drug addicts, parolees, and some others who are often barely above the illiterate level are accepted into the College. Instructors of regular English department reading classes also seek additional help for students with problems that cannot be handled in the classroom. Students bring in texts from courses that are too difficult for them and ask for clarification from the reading specialists. Other instructors request Learning Laboratory staff to give reading tests, and to follow up students needing reading assistance. They also ask the Learning Laboratory staff to lecture on topics such as, "How to Take a Chemistry Test?" or "How to take notes".

Most of the work done by the Learning Laboratory reading personnel is individual and individualized. The one-to-one relationship is believed to be most important in helping the adult who suffers the constant anxiety of feeling "I'm no good because I can't read". The reading specialists have made a difference in the lives of these people because of their sincerity and dedication.

Another section of the Laboratory is devoted to the "Writing Workshop". Student tutors work under the guidance of a member of the English department assigned full time to direct the writing workshop. Materials are available to assist the student who needs help in writing a coherent sentence or the one who is unable to organize a research paper. Instructors from many areas make special arrangements so that students may get assistance with writing assignments in the Writing Workshop.

Foreign students who are not registered in classes to learn English may work informally in the Learning Lab with a staff member who is completing her graduate training in English as a Second Language. These students may also be enrolled in college classes in English as a Second Language.

Hardware in the Laboratory includes the DuKane Projector (useful for grammar programs), a computer terminal with various remedial programs in basic skills, a variety of cassettes, some with commercial reading programs, others with homemade programs in word recognition, and many faculty lectures on tape.

The Math Laboratory adjacent to the Learning Laboratory has tutors chosen by individual math instructors and supervised this semester by two students who are working with Community College as part of their cooperative work experience.

Services are expanded as needs become obvious. Thus, the hours have been extended into the evening and to Saturday, and the Learning Lab now includes an annex above a bank around the corner from our present facility. Free services are offered throughout the year, and although the Learning Laboratory has gained acceptance, the hard core who just drop out or fail, and are too ashamed to ask for help, must constantly be pursued.

In addition to the programs and services that have been described, the Community College offers a variety of other services.

Preparatory work is available to potential students through both the ACT NOW and Upward Bound programs. The College's Division of Community Services has established neighborhood learning centers for preparation for the G.E.D., throughout the city.

The College has expanded services for handicapped students and has established a support program for them.

Moore, W. Against the Odds, California: Jossey-Bass, 1970.

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